

February 27, 2014 10:14 pm

Roma captured in raids on India

From Dr Gautam Pingle.

Sir, James Fontanella-Khan and Kester Eddy ([“Moving target”](#), Analysis, February 25), detailing the current condition of the Roma in Europe, state: “When they migrated from India to eastern Europe in the 1400s, many Roma were enslaved and others adopted a nomadic life to avoid servitude.” This implies that the Roma left India voluntarily, travelled freely and ended up slaves or nomads in Europe.

The Roma were captured, enslaved and transported by Muslim armies raiding western India (ninth century onwards) and north western India (from 10th century onwards). The last were taken after the Battle of Panipat of 1761, when “the women and children who survived were driven off as slaves – twenty-two thousand, many of them of the highest rank in the land”. All these data come from Muslim chroniclers of the relevant periods. The Roma would have found Europe more congenial than Persia, the Middle East, Turkey and Central Asia of that time.

Gautam Pingle, Hyderabad, India

February 25, 2014 7:51 pm

Roma: Moving target

By James Fontanella-Khan and Kester Eddy

Antipathy towards Europe’s most ostracised minority chimes with a debate that threatens the principle of free movement



Homeless: Roma women react as their houses are demolished in Bulgaria

Sitting in her small house with three grandchildren and a dog at her feet, Terike Major struggles to think of improvements to her life in the 10 years since she became an EU citizen. The 51-year-old Roma, who lives in a slum on the edge of the village of Sajokaza in northeastern [Hungary](#), says conditions have barely changed.

Unemployed and widowed, she scavenges through waste bins for scrap metal to sell to supplement her monthly €85 social security payment – a tenth of the average salary. “The state uncles [politicians] on the TV and radio say things are getting better. I don’t think so. At least, we don’t feel it here,” she says.

Her experience reflects the failures over many years towards the Roma, raising questions about the willingness and ability of Europe to integrate one of its most disadvantaged groups.

During negotiations ahead of the entry of eight former communist countries into the EU in 2004, leaders in western capitals made improving the lives of the 12m Roma in the region a condition for joining.

Despite encouraging first steps, including the launch of an EU framework for Roma integration and spending billions of euros on programmes, one of the continent’s most stigmatised minorities largely shares Ms Major’s view: life has not improved.

“Everything is in place to make a difference but something isn’t working,” says Violeta Naydenova, a Bulgarian Roma working as a policy analyst for the Open Society European Policy Institute. “The situation on the ground isn’t moving.”

The controversy over the Roma was reignited when work restrictions were lifted this year for EU citizens from [Romania and Bulgaria](#), where the majority of Roma come from. That has fuelled a widespread mistrust towards the Roma at a moment when the broader subject of immigration has become a fractious political issue in the UK, France, Italy and other European nations. To defenders of the European project, the debate risks sapping the EU’s momentum towards free movement.

[Viviane Reding](#), EU commissioner for justice, says: “Let me name the problem. The problem are the Roma people – the 10m-12m European citizens who live almost everywhere, not only in Bulgaria and Romania, most of them living in horrid poverty.” A 2011 survey by the United Nations Development Programme showed that 90 per cent of Roma live below the poverty line, 45 per cent of households lack basic amenities, 20 per cent have no medical cover and only one in two children attend primary school. Cases of discrimination have been on the rise in many western European countries, notably in Britain, France and Italy which once lectured EU-aspirant nations on Roma integration .

Hedviga Hankova, 28, left her Slovakian home town Kosice and moved to Belgium in 2004, hoping to leave discrimination behind. But life in Brussels has been far from easy. She is safer in the EU capital – in Kosice she was often beaten up by rightwing skinheads – but is still the target of racist taunts and has trouble finding work. “It’s common that people call me a ‘dirty gypsy’ but that doesn’t hurt me any longer,” she says. “The problem is that I have trouble finding work because I’m Roma. If I had a job, everything would be fine.”

The Roma will always mistrust the non-Roma and we [the non-Roma] will never recognise them as one of us

The biggest struggle for the Roma has been overcoming stereotypes that depict them as travelling petty criminals unwilling to integrate into mainstream society.

When they migrated from India to eastern Europe in the 1400s, many Roma were enslaved and others adopted a nomadic life to avoid servitude. After abolition in the mid 1800s, the majority of Roma remained disenfranchised and marginalised. During the second world war they were persecuted by the Nazis, with historians estimating that as many as 1.5m were murdered in the “[Roma Holocaust](#)”.

From 1945 they were assimilated through forced integration programmes by communist regimes across eastern Europe. The Roma were placed in state homes and employed in low-skilled jobs but remained segregated in areas with inadequate infrastructure. Their children were taught in the worst-performing schools.

By the time communist rule ended, the Roma were “unequipped to survive in the market systems that followed, and they fell upon exceedingly hard times”, says Jack Greenberg, a professor at Columbia Law School and civil rights lawyer who has worked with Roma activists since 2003.

Images of Roma beggars across Europe have fortified past prejudices, even though a study by the UNDP of Roma migrants in Belgium showed that the overwhelming majority had emigrated to work rather than claim benefits or abuse the welfare system.

“These age-old discriminatory patterns are extremely resilient . . . and now the rest of

Europe is waking up to this because the Roma are moving, even if the number is really small,” says Heather Grabbe, director of the Open Society European Policy Institute.

“The problem is that . . . the UK, the Netherlands, to a certain extent Germany, Austria,

France and Italy, are much more concerned about preventing Roma from moving than they are about improving living conditions in their home countries.”

Hostility is widespread across the political spectrum. Philippa Roe, a Conservative politician, recently accused Roma in central London of causing “a massive amount of disruption and low-level crime”, and of defecating on people’s doorsteps.

She backed earlier calls by David Cameron, UK prime minister, to curb the free movement of citizens from Romania and Bulgaria and threats to deport EU migrants found begging or sleeping rough.

In France, after [a 15-year-old girl was deported](#) in October, Manuel Valls, the Socialist interior minister, argued that Roma did not want to integrate and that their lifestyle conflicted with that of French citizens. He defended the policy of deportation instituted by Nicolas Sarkozy, the former centre-right president. Amnesty International, estimates that more than 10,000 Roma were evicted from French camps in the first half of 2013. The problem is that ... the UK, the Netherlands, to a certain extent Germany, Austria, France and Italy, are much more concerned about preventing Roma from moving than they are about improving living conditions in their home countries

At the heart of the Roma question is the joint failure of the EU, national and local governments to tackle racism. Brussels launched a Roma framework in 2011 to improve access to education, employment, healthcare and housing in each country. It earmarked €26.5bn between 2007 and 2013 from social, development and rural funds for programmes that range from getting local authorities to register Roma children in schools to ensuring fair access to social housing.

The results have been disappointing. How far the Roma benefited is “a question that haunts many decision makers, both in Brussels and in other EU capitals”, concluded a 2012 UNDP report called “Uncertain Impact”. It criticised a lack of “rigorous monitoring” and warned that “keeping the results vague makes possible the selling of fake approaches that could be useful for ‘ventilating money’ in the ‘development business’.”

Others say that injecting funds into impoverished regions creates more problems than solutions, generating resentment by non-Roma citizens.

Giovani Ion, 50, a transport entrepreneur in Bucharest, complains that “they – the

Roma – don’t do anything. They are lazy and we have to give them money for free . . .

otherwise they steal, it’s unfair”. But he adds that “there is nothing that governments

can do to solve the problem, as the Roma will always mistrust the non-Roma and we [the non-Roma] will never recognise them as one of us”.

Since the economic crisis, tensions have grown sharper as governments have come under pressure to reduce support for Roma-specific projects.

“Many countries are decreasing funding in education, and it’s getting harder to support Roma children long-term in their education,” says Judit Szira, executive director of the Roma Education Fund.

“Education is a national responsibility, and most nations in the EU aren’t implementing Roma inclusion policy at the local level, where it actually counts.”

One difficulty is that no European institution is willing to take full responsibility for the failure to help the Roma. The EU blames national governments for not fully implementing its framework, while member states deflect criticism to local authorities where officials complain about a lack of funding and support.

Some human rights watchdogs and Roma activists agree member states have been slow to implement the EU’s anti-discrimination legislation.

However, the majority complain that the commission itself has lacked courage in challenging states that overtly breach EU laws protecting the rights of minority groups.

“On corruption the commission shames and blames member states but on Roma

discrimination it doesn’t . . . it dares a lot less,” says Ms Grabbe.

Activists argue that the EU is under immense political pressure not to challenge member states on their human rights records and respect of fundamental rights. “Member states don’t want any human rights scrutiny,” says Nicolas Beger, director of Amnesty International’s European Institutions office. “But what we should be asking ourselves is what’s the European Commission’s role? Protecting marginalised EU citizens or protecting EU member states?”

The commission has denied being under any political pressure while claiming its main objective is to raise the plight of Roma citizens on the agenda of national governments. Officials in Brussels say their role is not to draw up national policies or put pressure on member states. “We don’t tell them what to do. We assist them but at the end it’s up to each member state to do what they think is best for them,” says one official.

Laura Cashman, a Roma scholar at Canterbury Christ Church University, argues:

“Everyone says that the EU should fix this problem because Roma live in EU countries but equally no member state is willing to give the commission control over the kind of

policy areas that it would need to address the problem. EU member states will not give the commission power or control over these key policy areas. That's a real problem." The deadlock leaves those tackling Roma discrimination frustrated. Valeriu Nicolae, an activist based in a Roma ghetto in Bucharest, Romania's capital, has repeatedly complained that the commission is too remote from the communities it seeks to help. He accused Brussels of wasting the funds it allocates to the Roma by failing to support smaller grass-roots projects in favour of bigger ones. "Those of you who truly care about Roma integration know that many of the commission's policies and procedures are counterproductive," he wrote recently in an open letter.

The vast majority of Roma activists agree that less money better spent would have a bigger impact. "We can solve the Roma question but it requires greater involvement of those who are on the ground. The commission has started doing it but it's not always easy," says Gabriela Hrabanova from the European Roma Grassroots Organisations

Network. "Failure is not an option . . . the future of the EU is tied to the future of the Roma."

Funding: A policy where results do not matter

Brussels has channelled billions of euros to raise living standards among the Roma populations in the past decade but how effective has this assistance been?

Astonishingly, nobody really knows, because – post EU accession – no overall assessments are being undertaken, says Dezideriu Gergely, executive director of European Roma Rights Centre, in Budapest.

"Governments track spending but they don't track results. These states have not put in monitoring measures, neither independent [nor] government measures, to track them," he says.

Scampia, a rough neighbourhood in northern Naples, received about €7m from the EU between 2005 and 2011 to build a village for 100 Roma families living in camps without basic infrastructure, sanitation and adequate levels of hygiene. But according to a probe carried out by Lunaria, a non-governmental organisation, nothing was built.

"If you just take this example and then ask yourself if this is how some of the EU money is spent for Roma inclusion, [then it] is a disaster," says Violeta Naydenova from the Open Society European Policy Institute.

Another impediment is a lack of effective action at the local level.

Mr Gergley says that “the other problem at the local level is political will. When you have [a council] with an anti-Roma agenda, how can you overcome that? How do you make sure that what the government has committed to is carried out”?

Tibor Derdak, director of education at the Jai Bhim school, established specifically to assist Roma education in Sajokaza, Hungary, says that simply throwing money at the problem is not the solution.

Mr Derbak says that while the EU earmarks funding for NGOs and Roma self-governments, “these NGOs depend on local political forces [to access it]”.

Since local political forces are often anti-Roma, they typically implement programmes but then stop them at the first possible moment, Mr Derdak adds.

“This money is less effective [than it should be],” he says. “The amounts are too huge and usually for short periods, so the work can’t be continued. The EU should allocate less money, for longer periods. This would reduce corruption.”

Additional reporting by Caroline Bauman in Brussels

Letter in response to this article:

[Roma captured in raids on India / From Dr Gautam Pingle](#)

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1. [Report](#)[KCharlesSimmonds](#) | February 27 6:43pm | [Permalink](#)

could it be that Gypsies also bear some responsibility for their problems?

2. [Report](#)[Harald Buchmann](#) | February 27 1:33am | [Permalink](#)
-

What if Roma indeed were "unwilling to integrate into mainstream society"? Isn't that what we pride our democracy with? Isn't that how we feel morally superior to China or Russia, that we allow people to live outside the mainstream society? Even the Nazis and the Stalinists protected the mainstream society. The problem is they killed everyone else. We don't kill the Roma, but we push them around until they can't live their culture anymore. The Dalai Lama once coined the term "cultural genocide". Many Europeans have since spent countless efforts to fight for Tibetans in far away China. For their own, European minority, they unfortunately exert much less effort.

3. [Report](#) [Vril](#) | February 26 5:21pm | [Permalink](#)

when will we see an article like this about another minority: MUSLIMS in Europe?

4. [Report](#) [EP](#) | February 26 4:57pm | [Permalink](#)

Interesting that in France and Greece the gap in the percentage between Roma household members of age 20 to 24 to have completed upper-secondary educations and non-Roma populations is the largest. Both countries have deeply rooted problems with racism.

5. [Report](#) [James Fontanella-Khan, FT](#) | February 26 2:53pm | [Permalink](#)

@slakbas - I don't really buy the argument that the Roma - as a group - "don't want to be integrated". It's more complicated than that, especially vis-a-vis the systemic abuse that Romani citizens across Europe have to endure.

6. [Report](#) [Wozul Ponz](#) | February 26 1:38pm | [Permalink](#)

@brian andrew stuarty

It isn't about genetics but culture. The Indians in Europe or in North America are predominantly middle-class Punjabi and Gujarati families, known for their thrift, hard-working attitude and business-minded culture. Gujaratis have dominated Arabian Sea trade for millennia. A common Indian saying goes that a Gujarati kid will sell you your own pants and you'd think you got a bargain.

The Roma on the other hand have descended from nomadic pastoralists following a tribal culture, not very different from the tribes of present-day NW Pakistan and Afghanistan. Such tribes still exist in the Indian state of Rajasthan and the Pakistani Punjab. Their culture is very ill-suited for business/trade, because of which they are still one of the poorest and most socially-backward ethnic groups of the subcontinent. Many of these tribal communities have a reserved status in India, which means that their children benefit from reservations in schools and colleges and adults have reserved quotas in government jobs.

That being said, the Indian origins of Roma are a thing of the past. Roma are Europeans now and have lived in European countries for well over 6 centuries. They have contributed massively to the culture of some European countries (notably Spain). Their integration is a responsibility of the EU member states.

7. [Report](#) [brian andrew stuarty](#) | February 26 12:37pm | [Permalink](#)

Did Germany pay any reparations to the Roma as they did the Jews ? Roma should be able to outcompete Europeans since they share Indian genetics and Indian immigrants in Europe generally outcompete their European hosts. There is a lot of genetic potential that is being wasted.

8. [Report](#) [sueiskra](#) | February 26 12:17pm | [Permalink](#)

Thanks for this article. What the Roma have suffered in the past and are still suffering in the heart of so-called civilised Europe is horrifying. It is true that the EU is far more concerned with the free movement of goods and capital than the free movement of people and to aggravate matters, governments such as the current British one are stoking the fires with anti-immigration, anti-benefits claimants rhetoric, ignoring the fact that millions of Britons have moved to France and Spain, for example. What is even worse is to read people justifying the treatment of the Roma with what are essentially racist arguments - even here, on the FT site - 'they' don't want to integrate, 'they' steal and beg and so on. Slurs that have been made against the Irish, the Jews, Asian immigrants in the UK and countless others.

Whenever people start by making wild generalisations about an ethnic group, they should stop and think: this ends in the gas chambers or the killing fields of Rwanda.

9. [Report](#)**Buda AI** | February 26 11:05am | [Permalink](#)

An excellent article.

And that's probably that. Nothing more.

What use is that? This thorny issue needs smaller articles, more often; a constant reminder of EU failure.

And a SHARP focus on corruption by non-Roma, repeatedly blighting the Roma.

And EDUCATION EDUCATION EDUCATION. Long term, or nothing will be solved.

10. [Report](#)**slakbas** | February 26 11:02am | [Permalink](#)

i'm probably going to offend a few people here, not my intention. Is there something strange about how all these countries treat gypsies or is there something strange about how gypsies integrate themselves in society? I don't think they want to be that integrated, and maybe that should just be accepted by us instead of us pointing fingers at governments or the Roma. They've been around for centuries and were probably less persecuted than jews, and yet they've always lived separate from main society. Maybe it's not a problem. Maybe we should just let them be and enjoy diversity.

11. [Report](#)**Tim** | February 26 8:24am | [Permalink](#)

"When they migrated from India to eastern Europe in the 1400s, many Roma were enslaved and others adopted a nomadic life to avoid servitude."

This is the most helpful explanation I have read about the Roma to date. Partly because it gives them a provenance. Without a provenance I suspect that they are always going to be the odd ones out.

12. [Report](#)**Pavel** | February 26 8:01am | [Permalink](#)

Part of the problem with access of the ROMA population to the EU funds of integration is the ROMA NGOs, who are often lead by semi-crimoinals and who stand as intermediate on the flow and distribution of the funds towards the ROMA population, taking their big share away. That should be changed.

13. [Report](#)**Felix Drost** | February 26 7:53am | [Permalink](#)

@Irish, if you are Irish you must be aware of the consequences of being generalized and discriminated against as a people. The English & British did that to the Irish for generations.

What happens to the Roma is that behaviour of individuals is extended to that of the entire group. I am aware both of what Roma individuals are capable of as well as of the group's image as well as of the group's mores and values. I was trained as an anthropologist so it all looks far too familiar and I can assure you of one thing: further discrimination and exclusion is not the cure no matter what your individual experience with individuals from the group may be.
